

The Good Shepherd Stands in the Way of My Wolves

John 10:11-18 (NIV)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

We are jumping into the middle of Jesus talking with Pharisees, these adherents of the Jewish faith who also added a number of additional rules and regulations so that they supposedly lived holier. The Pharisees were beside themselves that this Jesus had supposedly healed a man born blind and were indignant when Jesus basically said that they were blind. Jesus then launched into a sermon, a teaching, to them about him being the gate of God's flock, his family, that only through Jesus would anyone be saved from their sins, made right with God, and given eternal life with him forever in heaven.

Jesus progresses this thought to the Pharisees by saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep." (verses 11-13)

This Fourth Sunday of Easter we call "Good Shepherd Sunday." So, all the Bible readings involve an aspect of shepherds. It gets me reflecting on what I do, how I live, because my title "pastor" means "shepherd." I might sound weird to say it this way, but I have been called by God through this body of believers to use his Word to lead people to Jesus, to provide spiritual care for you, as you are God's flock, his sheep. And you are his flock, not really mine. God brought you together. God may have used me as that tool to bring you into his flock, but he is the one who made that happen, not me. He is the Good Shepherd.

Knowing my roles as a shepherd, a pastor, under the Good Shepherd, Jesus, I hear these words of Jesus and wonder, "Am I this hired hand?" This is a little humbling because the hired hand sucks. He cares nothing for the sheep, runs away when danger comes. He's kind of like that person in every zombie movie who runs to the car ahead of everyone else and locks the doors leaving his group to be torn apart.

In some ways, I know that I'm not like this hired hand because I know how much I do care about every single one of you. You can have your opinion about how much you think I care, but I can tell you this. If you're a member of Light of the Valley, every single Sunday I notice when you are here for worship, and when you are not. I am so glad when you are here, and I'm always concerned when I don't see you here, wondering if you're sick, traveling, hoping you didn't get into a car accident or anything. I think about you often. I call on you, text you, email you, if you haven't been here in a while. I pray for you when I think about you.

For those of you who are not members of Light of the Valley (yet) and those who are here for the very first time: I see you. I care about you too. I've actually been praying for you too, but I just didn't know your face or your name (yet). And I want to get to know you. Like with our members, I want to help connect you to the Good Shepherd Jesus and keep you connected to him, to be part of his one flock, gathering all of us from so many difference places and backgrounds. I want you to grow in your faith in Jesus because I want you to have what he's offering – a full life with sins forgiven, covered by Jesus' perfection lived for you, a forever home in the bliss of heaven with God himself.

Unlike this hired hand shepherd, I don't think that I abandon you to these wolf attacks that Jesus talks about. However, I also know that I don't always stand in the way of the wolves that try to scatter you from being in God's flock. Jesus doesn't specify who or what these wolves are here. In other places, Jesus talks about wolves in sheep's clothing, which relates to our first Bible reading where Paul specified the wolves this way: "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them." (Acts 20:29-30) I stand up here week to week to preach you the voice of the Good Shepherd, his Word, not mine, not my take on it, not my interpretation. His Word is what will help you recognize these wolves who teach falsely and try to scatter you from being in God's flock. Yet, I can't stand in the way and stop who or what you listen to. I'm simply not there all the time.

If we see these wolves in a broader sense of anything that tries to scatter you and me from God, then there are a whole lot more wolves that I don't stand in the way of and maybe even run away from. The wolves can be gossip among fellow Christians, among your friends. Yet, I don't hear it, and I'm not there when it's said. I didn't stand in the way and absorb those verbal attacks for you. Satan sicks on you and me wolves of loneliness, making you feel like no one cares about you, that no one values you or wants to spend time with you. I recognize that while I would love to stand in the wolf of loneliness' way, I can't always be there for you. When wolves of constant health problems or the health problems of loved ones strike, I can't step in the way of and stop that. When wolves of grief and frustration and anger try to scatter you away from God and his flock, his people, I can't step in and take that for you either. The wolves of temptation, I'm still not able to take that from you. I am not able to be that kind of a good shepherd for you. Really no pastor is, and maybe you can relate.

There's a song by Depeche Mode called "Personal Jesus." *Reach out, and touch faith. Your own personal Jesus. Someone to hear your prayers. Someone who cares.* Maybe you know it better as covered by Johnny Cash. Songwriter Martin Gore based it on Priscilla Presley who said of her husband Elvis, "He's my own personal Jesus." Martin knew that this was not a balanced view that someone should have of any person, let alone their spouse.

Have you or are you trying to be someone's personal Jesus? Do you view it as your role to stand in the way of wolves for them, to lay down your life for them? Are you the husband who steps in the way and glares at anyone who has anything bad to say about your wife? Are you the wife who will not tolerate any disparaging remarks about your husband? Are you the parent who wants to go and take the insults and the punches that your kid has been receiving? Are you the child who wants to take on the health problems from your mom or dad so that you suffer instead of them? Do you want to absorb your friend's loneliness and grief for them?

You and I, we may not be like the hired hand who cares nothing for the sheep, for God's people, but we are not able to be their personal Jesus and take on their wolves that are trying to scatter them from God. We can't do that because we are not enough. There is only one person who can stand in the way of all the wolves that come in to our lives and take on and absorb that danger. We already have a personal Jesus. Maybe unsurprisingly, it's Jesus.

Jesus said, "I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." (verses 17b-18a) Jesus' death on the cross was no accident; it was his choice. He saw all the wolves that seek to separate you from him and decided to stand in their way for you. The wolves pulled him apart, killed him. He laid down his life for you. And then, unlike any other pastor or religious leader ever did or ever could do, Jesus took his life right back up, rising from dead three days later!

Having died for our sins, he now lives to never die again. Because of this he now stands in the way of all the wolves that wish to separate us from him. For the false teachers, he still calls out to us with his voice, his eternal truth, preserved through the Bible, through faithful pastors who continue to share with you what he has done for you, how he lived perfectly for you, how he sacrificed his life in place of yours, how he has brought you into his flock with his voice. He stands in the way of the wolves of loneliness by not just telling you that he is with you always but by actually being with you always. He stands in the way of those wolves from Satan as the liar whispers in your ears that no one cares about you or values you. He does this when he shows you the nail marks on his hands and where the spear pierced him in his side and his full and perfect life lived for you which tells you that God values you in measure of his perfect life given in exchange for yours. Jesus steps in the way of the wolves of grief as his voice reminds us that he has conquered death already and will obliterate it in the end, that your loved ones who die as one of his sheep live with him right now, that he will gather you together with them in the heavenly flock, that he will personally wipe away every single one of your tears. Jesus stands in the way of the wolves of temptations for you, showing you that he died to your sin and freed you from its control.

Not only does the Good Shepherd take on all these wolves for us, but he calls you and me to shepherd his sheep with him. No, we are not their personal Jesuses, but you and I are the ones that God uses to bring his voice to others. He has us be flesh and bone by the telephone, that someone can lift up the receiver, and know that they're not alone. Because God cared for you, you get to show that same care to other people, to hear their prayers, to say prayers for them. Yes, they can confess whatever's on their chest to God in the privacy of their hearts and in their prayers, but they also can confess with their lips to you, and then you get to give audible words of forgiveness to them because the Good Shepherd laid down his life for them only to take it back up again.

You and I, we are not the good shepherd. That's not our role. We are not someone's personal Jesus. Jesus is our personal Jesus, our Good Shepherd. He still stands in the way of wolves for us every single day. We get to be the flesh and bone instrument of our Good Shepherd, using his voice with his words, to continue to gather this flock as he continues to stand in the way of wolves for us. Amen.